FOOD SECURITY

OUR INVESTMENT: $550,000

OUR APPROACH

Access to nutritious food is fundamental, yet thousands of people struggle with food insecurity in Kent County. We fund community meal programs that nourish those in immediate need, meal delivery programs for homebound seniors, food preservation and gardening classes in low-income neighborhoods, and affordable grocery options for those who routinely struggle to afford food.

THE PEOPLE

Food insecurity affects 71,970 people in Kent County, but it hits children the hardest. In our community 1 in 7 kids are at risk of hunger. That’s more than the entire student population of the Grand Rapids Public School district. Seniors are also at risk and often have a harder time accessing resources, especially if they can’t leave their homes. But food insecurity affects the able-bodied and employed as well. In fact, 37% of Kent County residents, including 28% of employed households, are struggling to meet their basic needs.

WHAT’S WORKING?

Short-Term Interventions

Meals on Wheels Western Michigan: If you qualify for food assistance, you can purchase at least some of your meals from the grocery store using a Bridge Card. But what if you can’t leave your house? Meals on Wheels Western Michigan delivers tasty and nutritious meals to homebound seniors. But Meals on Wheels is about more than nutrition. Program staff and volunteers develop relationships with the seniors they serve, improving emotional wellbeing and physical health at the same time.

Long-Term Solutions

Community Food Club: If you need food desperately, you can get help at an emergency food pantry. If you’re completely self-sufficient, you can take your pick of grocery stores. But what if you’re somewhere in between? Enter the Community Food Club. In exchange for a small membership fee, Community Food Club members receive monthly points they can use to shop a wide variety of foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, eggs, and dairy products, along with shelf-stable items like pasta and cereal. The Food Club empowers members to make their own choices and gives them the satisfaction of contributing to a valued community resource.

WHAT IF WE COULD DO MORE?

• Institute universal breakfast and lunch programs in all Kent County schools
• Increase grant and other investment opportunities for local produce growers
• Promote Double Up Food Bucks and other healthy eating incentives to underserved communities
• Expand programs serving food-insecure seniors as population ages
• Empower neighbors to grow, cook, and preserve their own food
Max looks like a lot of teenagers. He regularly joins his mom, Maria, and younger brother, Danny, on their shopping trips to the Community Food Club. He's always helpful, keeping an eye on Danny while their mom stocks up on fruits, vegetables, and healthy juices. Maria is a single mom and relies on the Food Club to keep food consistently in their home. “The Food Club helps. Instead of having empty cupboards at the end of the month, we have something on the shelves,” she says.

While Max looks like a lot of teenagers, he's pretty extraordinary. This past spring Max graduated from City High School as a National Merit Scholar, National Hispanic Scholar, and one of the school's valedictorians. He's a multi-talented artist, performing in his school choir and working with a well-known local street artist to create works of art throughout his neighborhood. Max’s hard work and perseverance led him to an incredible opportunity: a full-ride scholarship at Harvard University, where he is now studying political science.

Maria reflected on how their family’s improved food security affected Max specifically, saying, “If we kept running out of food every month, he would have felt pressured to get a job and help support the family. The Food Club allowed him to go to City High School and keep up with a rigorous school environment.”

Access of West Michigan calls itself a food justice organization. That’s because they don’t simply want to treat the symptoms of inequality, like hunger. Access and the members of their food pantry network want to fundamentally transform our food system. They understand that those who grow our food are just as much a part of the equation as those who eat it.

Through their United Way-funded farm-to-pantry program, known as Health, Access, and Equity in Our Local Food Systems (HAELFS), Access pantries purchase healthy, sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, honey, dried beans, and other foods from local farmers at full price. Then they turn around and sell that food at Pantry Farm Markets where neighbors can purchase it at half price using cash, debit, or a Bridge Card.

In this way, United Way and Access are investing in the future of our local food system and bringing healthy food into the heart of neighborhoods where, too often, it’s hard to find.

Max’s Story

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